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Lehner, S. (2017). 'Absent and yet Somehow Present': Idealized Landscapes and the Counter-historical Impulse in Contemporary Northern Irish Photography and Writing. *Review of Irish Studies in Europe* 1

Published in:
Review of Irish Studies in Europe

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
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‘Absent and yet Somehow Present’: Idealized Landscapes and the Counter-historical Impulse in Contemporary Northern Irish Photography and Writing

Stefanie Lehner

This article explores how three artists are responding to the idealized landscape that is contemporary Northern Ireland. I argue that the rural/urban dichotomy which implicitly or explicitly forms a point of departure in the photographic collections of David Farrell’s *Innocent Landscapes* (2001) and John Duncan’s *Trees from Germany* (2003) is also evident in David Park’s 2008 novel, *The Truth Commissioner*, offering a new lens to explore the play of absences and presences that constitute the peace process. The three works allow us to perceive how idealized landscapes act as façades that conceal, contain and defer alternative realities.

The foundational text of the peace process, the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, promised a new dispensation after the bloodshed that claimed close to 4,000 deaths in almost four decades. The Agreement has been held up as a ‘model’ for other troubled societies in resolving violent conflicts.¹ The model itself is based on a vision of hope, optimism and a shared, integrated and stable future. Paradoxically, this vision is underpinned by an institutional framework based on a recognition of the politics of the past — a consociational structure of governance that upholds the dominant ethno-national divide that characterizes Northern Irish society. The effect of this recognition is the integration of the individual ‘I’ or ‘me’ within a collective ‘us’ or ‘we’. The traditional ideological divides continue to hold true in this recognition, but they are rendered useful and eventually marginal to the necessity of moving forward as a divided-united society. Most likely, this was not the intention but the logic was already present in the second paragraph of the Agreement, which stated that:

The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.²

It is important to note that, founded upon the historic geographies of ancient antagonisms, the new Northern Irish idyll is nonetheless not idealist: issues centering on sectarianism and segregation, along with unresolved questions concerning victims’ rights and needs, continue to influence debate within the Northern Ireland Assembly and on the streets of the country’s cities (along with a sporadic but continuing campaign of violence by anti-peace process ‘dissidents’). But it is the emphasis on the future as distinct from the past that creates and sustains a visionary vista. In other words, the peace process makes present a future while simultaneously absencing certain pasts.

¹ See Eamonn O’Kane, ‘Learning from Northern Ireland? The Uses and Abuses of the Irish “Model”’, *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 12 (2010): 239–256.

² Northern Ireland Office, ‘Declaration of Support’, paragraph 2, *The Agreement: Agreement Reached in the Multi-party Negotiations*, 10 April 1998, <http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>. Assessed 10 July 2013, (emphasis added).

I want to suggest that the three chosen artists reveal these absented pasts. Ostensibly and immediately concerned with rural/urban divides, the artists' work gives way to further dichotomies that, I suggest, expose an alternative vision or a counter-history of the peace process — one in which the effects of the clash between the future and the past, and the values between the individual and the communal, are placed firmly centre stage. The works that I will consider demonstrate the politics involved in subsuming individuals within the communal, and the ethics involved in how ordinary people are lost in a discourse of empowerment. Centering upon themes of loss, the artists engage in a process of recovery, of making present absences and of countering the silencing of the past by the imperative of looking to the future.

The binaries of absence/presence, loss/recovery, silence/empowerment prop up the two key binary relationships on which the peace process is based — namely, as suggested above, Future/Past and Collective/Individual. As Jacques Derrida points out, underpinning every binary is a power hierarchy whereby one term is privileged over the other; for instance, the Future is privileged over the Past and the Collective has been enshrined to the detriment of the Individual. The value of the privileged term depends, however, on its exclusion from the negative values associated with the absent other. In this way, the privileged term always bears the 'trace' of the absent term, which makes the system of opposition inherently unstable; the oppositions themselves become contingent and arbitrary. Derrida's coinage to express the tension between the binary pairs, *différance*, suggests a spatial and temporal displacement of meaning, pointing to the movement of deferral at the same time as it suggests a distinction or a difference. He explains:

It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called 'present' element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present.³

The 'trace' is the 'absent present' that the sign differs and defers from: it is the absent part of the sign's presence and thus bears witness to a different temporality. It introduces instability into the heart of each binary system and thus acts as a destabilization.

The ostensible privileging of binaries within Farrell, Duncan and Park's works serves to expose their tenacity and tenuousness. The implicit and explicit explorations of the urban/rural dichotomy works to expose and deconstruct a subsequent set of oppositions with which they are associated. For example, Farrell's series of photographs capture 'a typically Irish (beautiful) "innocent" landscape' (as he explains the title of his collection) that is exposed as an urban crime scene, relating to the secret burial sites of those individuals who were 'disappeared' in the name of communal politics, mainly by the IRA during the Northern Irish Troubles.⁴ In turn, Duncan's *Trees from Germany* traces Belfast's new glossy urban

³ Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 13.

⁴ David Farrell, 'Introduction', *Innocent Landscapes* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2001), non-paginated.

developments, in which nature is either being contained within or threatens to overwhelm its sectarian past. Farrell's and Duncan's images are notable by the absence of people: in their photographs, the individual has disappeared in the face of overarching ideologies that render it meaningless in their vision of the future — whether the sectarian ethno-nationalisms of Republicanism or Loyalism, or the new global order of neoliberalism. David Park's *The Truth Commissioner* populates the desolate landscapes of their photographs, implicitly juxtaposing the desire for a redemptive, amnesiac countryside with a city that enforces memory, represented by the book's newly established Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) for Northern Ireland. Through the operations of this institution, the individual's experiences are made public and politicized; yet, in Park's novel, the Truth Commission becomes subject to wider collective forces that Duncan and Farrell also grapple with.

In each case, the urban/rural divide is invaded and complicated by temporality: the past returns to disturb the present and brings a desired utopian future into peril. By foregrounding the present, each artist exposes absence and reveals unarticulated and untenable hierarchies. In so doing, the collective compromises on which the peace process is proceeding (the imperative of 'we' honouring the dead by moving forward) are brought into a harsh, scrutinising light. As Colin Graham has pointed out, these collective compromises involved a recognition that

issues which directly related to those who might be called 'combatants', such as decommissioning and policing reform, were the dominant, leftover political topics, and so the theatrics of these issues tended to drown out other 'legacies' of the Troubles.⁵

As Graham goes on to explain, one of the key 'legacy' issues is related to the fate of the 'disappeared'; other issues relate to ideas about truth recovery, provision of care and resources for victims, and enduring sectarianism.⁶ Taken together, Farrell, Duncan and Park might be seen to be attending to these 'drown[ed] out' issues, and, as such, represent something of a counter-history to the dominant discourses and dynamics of the peace process. Although each artist explores how the political imperatives and exigencies of the 'we' or the collective are mediated, the ultimate focus — through the construction and deconstruction of binaries — is on the personal: namely, how the collective impinges upon and subsumes individual stories and experiences in a manner which works to disempower and silence, even when claiming emancipation and amplification.

David Farrell, *Innocent Landscapes*

David Farrell's *Innocent Landscapes* shows images of the excavations for the secret graves of nine of the Disappeared at seven sites in the Republic of Ireland. First exhibited in Actes Sud in Arles (France) in July 2001, the photographs went on to win the prestigious European Publishers' Award for Photography. In his postscript to the book, Farrell notes: 'In the thirty years of Northern Ireland's conflict and atrocity a small group of people stood apart: they

⁵ Colin Graham, *Northern Ireland: 30 Years of Photography* (Belfast: Belfast Exposed/The MAC, 2013), 160.

⁶ The Northern Ireland Executive has recently appointed Dr Richard Haas, a former US envoy to Northern Ireland to investigate these outstanding legacy issues. Haas is due to present recommendations by the end of 2013.

were the ‘missing’, the ‘disappeared’ — absent and yet somehow present.⁷ Their status as ‘absent presences’ disturbs the ‘idealized landscape’ of the future orientation of the peace process: as for the families concerned, no moving on, commemoration or forgetting is easily possible; they cannot properly grieve and bury their loved ones. For the relatives of the Disappeared, the lack of resolution is an indelible stain and gives rise to a gap in terms of justice and accountability. For example, the son of Jean McConville, mother of ten who was abducted in 1972 and has become one of the most high profile cases of the Disappeared, has recently dismissed a private apology by Gerry Adams by highlighting the very public nature of his mother’s disappearance: she was taken away by about ten men and women, ostensibly acting on behalf of the community. ‘If this had happened in any other country,’ Michael McConville notes in an interview, ‘they would have been brought up for war crimes.’⁸ Thus, the Disappeared’s absent presences work to expose the moral fudges and compromises involved in governing for the future.

Although numbers are still uncertain, to date there are seventeen known cases of individuals who are suspected of having been secretly abducted and murdered, mainly by the IRA, and who were then buried in unmarked sites in the Irish Republic.⁹ Apart from Captain Robert Nairac, an undercover British agent, all the others were Catholic and disappeared as part of the IRA’s internal ‘policing’ system. In 1999, the IRA issued a statement which contained an apology and the names of nine victims killed and secretly buried by their members, together with information on their approximate burial sites, following the passing of a bill which provided amnesty for those giving information on what became known as the ‘Sites of The Disappeared’.¹⁰ The following searches, however, only resulted in the discovery of three bodies at the time: Eamonn Molloy, Brian McKinney and John McClory (the latter two in a double grave).

Farrell’s *Innocent Landscapes* remind us of the violence involved in the disappearance of those individuals by juxtaposing the sublime beauty and seeming innocence of the Irish landscape with the desecration effected by the excavations. Speaking of his first visit to Colgagh, County Sligo, in 1999, Farrell emphasizes the contrast between the idyllic rural scene and the destruction caused by the searches: ‘The first thing I noticed was how the field seemed almost violated; rough tyre tracks; group of rocks piled here and there; a solitary silver birch tree abandoned on its side, its roots holding onto that circle of earth which had once held it firmly in place.’¹¹ His photographs emphatically bear witness to the traces of these violations — the deracinated trees, splintered branches, and dug-up fields, which, as Mark Phelan notes, ‘appear almost as wounds on the landscape.’ Phelan continues to note: ‘The invasion of this pastoral world by modern machinery has a further connotative charge, in that the violence of its excavations mnemonically reenacts the violence perpetrated on innocent victims by their executioners, as the diggers’ defiling on the eponymous “innocent

⁷ David Farrell, ‘The Disappeared – A Brief History’, *Innocent Landscapes* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2001), unpaginated.

⁸ UTV News, ‘Adams ‘apologised’ to McConville son’, 6 December 2012, <http://www.u.tv/news/Adams-apologised-to-McConville-son/68a3a6e9-270d-455a-89fb-5bb48d9d8c8d>. Accessed 12 July 2013.

⁹ See The Disappeared of Northern Ireland website: www.thedisappearedni.co.uk/about/. Accessed 18 July 2013.

¹⁰ See Farrell, ‘The Disappeared – A Brief History’, *Innocent Landscapes* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2001), unpaginated.

¹¹ David Farrell, ‘Introduction’ to *Innocent Landscapes* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2001), unpaginated.

landscapes” embodies the IRA’s desecration of the “Disappeared” bodies and the denial of their burial rites.¹²

The images are all from different parts of the Southern Republic but draw attention to the absent Northern Irish Troubles. Given that the Disappeared were individuals who were (mostly) abducted from the city (Belfast) and brought for secret burial in the country, urban violence and criminality are implicitly present in these representations of a pristine countryside, corrupting and scarring it. As Alfred Hickling remarks in his review of the exhibition, these images ‘would be postcard-perfect picnic spots if we were not aware of their status as crime locations.’¹³ Several of Farrell’s photos emphasise the fact that we are effectively confronting a crime scene by foregrounding the police cordon that cuts through the landscape and delineates the area that could possibly contain the unmarked grave. While the cordons work, on the one hand, to exclude us, making us passive observers who have arrived at the scene too late, on the other hand, they also draw us in, sparking ‘a detective impulse in the viewer’, as Graham suggests.¹⁴ The ethical impetus of Farrell’s images is to impel us to look for and try to detect the absent presences, the untold narratives and unclaimed experiences to which his photographs bear witness.

Farrell’s photographs trace the layers of absence and presence, forcing our attention to this tension through the book’s organisation. Each of its seven sections is dedicated to a specific site and opens with a double page that confronts us with pure presences: on the right hand side, we find a dawn or dusk image of the site, notable by its impressionistic blue colour scale; on the left hand side, we have a reproduction of a magnified, annotated ordinance survey map that indicates the approximate burial site. The juxtaposition of these romantic panoramas with the detailed specificity of the map-excerpts creates distance and proximity at the same time. But despite its pristine beauty, there is something foreboding in the ambiguous twilight setting of the landscape. Equally, while the map promises us a sense of location, the extreme magnification ultimately creates dislocation. The following double page then zooms in to the site by daylight and draws our attention, instead, to absences: devoid of humans as such,¹⁵ the right-side image points to traces of human presences, mostly in the form of commemorative shrines — composed of or containing a cross, rosary beads, prayer cards, a statue of the Virgin Mary, flowers — or marks left by the search-teams — such as the yellow police cordon, disturbed vegetation, unearthed debris and stones. Those traces work as reminders of those who will remain absent, the Disappeared, who can only seemingly be made present by their name that is inscribed on the opposite page. The ethical effect is a call for remembrance: Farrell’s photographs stand as sites of memory, what Pierre Nora calls *lieux*

¹² Mark Phelan, ‘Not So Innocent Landscapes: Remembrance, Representation, and the Disappeared’, *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict*, eds. P. Anderson and J. Menon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 289.

¹³ Alfred Kicklin, Review of ‘Innocent Landscapes’, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2003/jun/07/art.artsfeatures>. Accessed 13 July 2013.

¹⁴ Graham, *Northern Ireland: 30 Years of Photography*, 166.

¹⁵ The only human beings that are pictured in *Innocent Landscapes* are Margaret McKinney, mother of Brian, whose gaze is fixed on her son’s shrine and a man, presumably her husband, who we only see in turned-away profile, both providing a ‘counterpoint’ to the camera’s ‘expectant gaze into the violated landscape’, as Farrell notes in his blog with *Source: Photographic Review* (see <http://source.ie/blog/>). The image appears at the opening of the book, preceding the section on Colgagh.

de mémoire, 'where memory crystallises and secretes itself'.¹⁶ Susan Sontag has alluded to this function through her notion that 'all photographs are *memento mori*'. She explains: 'To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.'¹⁷

This temporal dialectic is captured in Farrell's series of images of what he calls 'The Swallowing Tree': they capture the transitional process in which a tree at Coghalstown Wood, Wilkinstown (where searches for the bodies of Kevin McKee and Seamus Wright took place), which was used by family members as a shrine, is slowly 'swallowing' the prayer card and rosary beads that were pinned to its bark.¹⁸ In his contribution to *LANDSCAPEStories*, Farrell describes the complicity of this process with 'the killers' original intention of nature erasing traces but also nature attempting to heal through growth through cycles of life and death.¹⁹ He explains: 'In and of itself this swallowing is a powerful metaphor for all my work on the *Disappeared* — a memory being slowly subsumed by voracious nature and the passage of time. And yet at the same time its protrusion proclaims a small act of defiance, a punctum of remembrance in opposition to concealment in an isolated wood in County Meath.'²⁰ The idealised landscape of the peace process, with its emphasis on a 'fresh start', seems to have a comparable impetus to swallow up or subsume the past. Aware of the threat of memory 'disappear[ing] irretrievably' or 'becoming a tool of the ruling classes', as Walter Benjamin cautions in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Farrell's photographs seize hold of these 'punctums of remembrance' as they flash up 'at a moment of danger'.²¹ In refusing to be swallowed and forgotten, his images defiantly remind us of an alternative version of history and reality that the idealised landscape of the peace process seeks to overwrite and erase.

John Duncan, *Trees From Germany*

Just as Farrell's 'Swallowing Tree' captures the process of natural transition in which memory traces are in danger of being subsumed yet retain and assert their presence, Duncan's *Trees from Germany* traces similar effects of the social and economic changes that are part of Belfast's post-ceasefire redevelopments. Expanding from his *Boom Town* (2002/3) series of photographs, *Trees from Germany* documents the transitional moments in Belfast's urban landscapes, which are dominated by dichotomies between the shining 'new' and the resilient 'old'.²² Several of his opening images depict building sites, where churned earth and dug-up

¹⁶ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (1989): 7.

¹⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), 15.

¹⁸ David Farrell, 'The Swallowing Tree', *LANDSCAPEStories* 'Trees' July 2012, <http://www.landscapestories.net/issue-07/021-david-farrell?lang=en>. Accessed 26 July 2013.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. The term *punctum* derives from the vocabulary of Roland Barthes, as detailed in his key study of photography, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000). There, Barthes differentiates between the *studium* of a photograph, that is 'a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment ... but without special acuity', and its *punctum* (meaning wound, prick, mark): the element which breaks (or punctuates) the *studium* as it 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [the observer]'. For Barthes, 'a photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (26-7).

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 247.

²² John Duncan, *Trees from Germany* (Belfast: Belfast Exposed Photography, 2003).

pavements appear as similar wounds in the cityscape as the violations through the excavations in Farrell's photographs. Specifically, it is the uprooted trees in images such as 'Cotton Court, Waring Street', 'College Square East', and 'Harbour Exchange, Airport Road West' that suggest an eerie resonance with Farrell's description of the deracinated birch tree. But whereas Farrell's tree was violently taken out of its natural environment, in Duncan's images the trees themselves become alien, seemingly 'unnatural' objects, to be implanted into the newly developed urban environment: in the three above-named images, the trees are all de-naturalised by laying horizontally on their side; they are cordoned off, isolated, and contained — whether by fences and warning traffic cones, as is the case in the two former images, or, as in the last image, by the fact that the tree lies forlorn in the middle of a small island on a large parking lot. The title of Duncan's series — *Trees from Germany* — itself draws attention to their status as non-indigenous, imported, and imposed. Indeed, the trees and other plants that feature in most of the other images of the new building complexes are non-native and give the distinct sense of being man-made or manufactured: this is, for instance, the case with the potted plants that decorate the 'Park Avenue Apartments, Bankmore Street', the well-confined vegetation of 'South Studios, Tate Avenue', or the rolled-out grass on 'Days Hotel, Sandy Row'. By making 'nature' seem itself unnatural in Belfast's new urban cultures, Duncan's images play with the urban/rural divide.

These alien remnants of the rural environment are, however, part of the 'new' redeveloped future of the city: 'nature' is here harnessed for urban and social renewal; the neat man-made artificiality suggests gentrification, luxury, and progress. Yet, at the same time, 'natural' growth is only ever allowed a specifically demarcated space and place: given that most images show 'nature' enclosed — mostly by fences, but also by other boundaries such as pots, beds, and streets — the 'rural' or 'natural' seems to pose a threat to the urban environment. This is, for example, apparent in the photograph of 'Berry Street, Smithfield', in which lilacs and other shrubs threaten to outgrow and overtake the new Belfast — symbolised by the multi-story car park that dominates the background. These unwieldy growths are just about contained by the corrugated iron fence that encloses them. As forces of 'nature', they become metonymic of a past that the new Belfast is keen to repress and forget.²³

The relationship between the rural and the urban, the past and the present that Duncan's images explore is addressed in the epigraph he takes from Robert Lloyd Praeger's 1937 book *The Way That I Went: An Irishman in Ireland*, which describes 'the Belfast of today [as] essentially a city on stilts'. Praeger imagines 'how quaint it would be if some new kind of X-ray would allow us to see the city as it really is — all standing up on sticks thirty or forty feet above its true foundation, just as the dwellings of certain primitive peoples, past or present, were or are build on piles in lakes or rivers.'²⁴ The sentence that Duncan quotes is the following: 'I have vague visions of the blue clay — sleech, to use the local term — all dissolved away, and a busy prehistoric community living on the old forest surface amid a modern forest of piles, far below the roaring streets of the present city.' As with his images in *Trees from Germany*, Duncan's epigraph foregrounds the idea of a temporal coexistence of the past and the present: just as different epochs of history are layered on top of each other so, too, the stages that usually figure as progress from rural ('old forest') to urban ('resent city') coincide. Duncan's photographs seek to offer such an X-ray vision that cuts through time and progress.

²³ See also Colin Graham's excellent discussion of this image in *Northern Ireland: 30 Years of Photography*, 107.

²⁴ Robert Lloyd Praeger, *The Way That I Went: An Irishman in Ireland* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1937), 89.

Notably, several images parallel the 'rural' or 'natural' with traces of Belfast's sectarian 'past', which is still defiantly present. In 'South Studios, Tate Avenue', the line of consecutive fir trees to the right compositionally draws attention to the actual *punctum* of the image: the huge structure of the bonfire, erected for the Twelfth of July celebrations, which looms over the wall of the new apartment complex and punctuates its *studium*.²⁵ In the near exact centre of this structural parallelism appears a partly hidden Union Jack. Like the trees and flowerbeds that are part of the new studio-flats, the bonfire is constructed and appears somewhat 'unnatural' and foreign in this spotless regenerated environment. Yet, while cordoned off, it cannot be hidden, forgotten or erased but makes its presence felt: the new neoliberal order of peace process Belfast cannot contain 'nature' or the 'past'. Just as in 'Berry Street' or 'Langtry Court, Templeton Avenue', in which shrubs rebelliously grow through the defensive-looking high green fence, in many of Duncan's images reminders of the old and sectarian Belfast — in the form of peacelines (pictured in 'Langtry Court'), security cameras ('Limestone Road'), flags ('Newtownards Road'), or the burned out 'Mackies' factory (notorious for its position on the West Belfast Springfield Road yet only employing Protestants) — assert their presence in this new, supposedly 'asectarian' Belfast of the future. Comparable to Farrell's work, Graham suggests that Duncan's work is underpinned by an ethics of seeing, which insists on tracing those absent presences.²⁶

As with Farrell's photographs, Duncan's images are devoid of people: they show derelict, depopulated 'landscapes' that are similarly marked by human traces — mainly of the cultural traditions of the Protestant community. But while humans themselves are mostly absent, all the more present are the fences and other forms of division that punctuate the images.²⁷ One of the only two people in the pictures is a woman negotiating the security code to new housing development in 'Bell Towers, Ormeau Road'. She looks forelorn and nearly vanishes against the huge defensive-looking gate. The new commercially gentrified Belfast (re)creates similar divisions and zones of exclusion as the 'old' one before, now more obviously along class-lines. Duncan's photographs expose the underlying sameness between the old and new Belfast. In so doing, he reveals the paradox inherent in the peace process's vision of the future, in which old and new is conflated under the rubric of a collective 'we'. Duncan's depopulated landscapes almost literally point us to the binaries involved in this paradox by exposing its tendency to leave individuals out.

David Park, *The Truth Commissioner*

Despite its different artistic form, David Park's *The Truth Commissioner* exhibits significant similarities with the photographs of Farrell and Duncan. These allow us to explore further the play of absences and presences that are traced in their works. As suggested before, Park's novel can be seen to populate the deserted landscapes of Duncan's and Farrell's images, inscribing them with narratives that are not explicitly there. *The Truth Commissioner* hinges

²⁵ See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1981; London: Vintage, 2000), 26-7.

²⁶ See Graham, *Northern Ireland: 30 Years of Photography*, 107.

²⁷ In his essay, 'The Spaces in Between' that prefaces the published version of *Trees from Germany* (Belfast: Belfast Exposed Photography, 2003), David Brett notes that he spotted 'seventeen metal railings or barriers in the photographs John Duncan has assembled'.

on the 'absent presences' that Farrell's *Innocent Landscapes* trace: it concerns the case of one of the 'Disappeared', the fifteen-year-old Connor Walshe, that is brought before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which functions in Park's novel as an 'idealised landscape' in conformance with the collective dictates of the peace process. The novel's opening chapter tells a story that precedes Farrell's photographs, while the novel ends with the description of a pristine innocent landscape that is disrupted by the arrival of a digger, looking for the remains of Walshe's body.

The novel opens with Connor's abduction from Belfast to a desolate farmhouse. The third-person narration is filtered through the boy's consciousness: he experiences his forced displacement as a journey 'to the end of the world and he's frightened that he could fall off its unknown, uncharted edge'.²⁸ The novel inverts the traditional tropes of the rural/urban divide as Connor experiences the countryside as 'strange, stranger than he's ever known' (6), which starkly contrasts with the secure familiarity of his urban home: 'The familiar is what he knows and never willingly strays from, so all his life has been a slow trawl through the safety of his own area where the boundaries are fixed and mind-narrowed into a meshed grids of streets and a couple of roads that only rarely has he followed into the city's centre' (1).²⁹ As Connor escapes from the farmhouse into 'the unknown' (6) surrounding countryside, he is as alien to this rural world as the trees are alien to the new Belfast in Duncan's images. As a city-creature, Connor is uprooted in this mysterious and threatening environment. Park's prose powerfully captures his fearful sense of dislocation and anxious desire for belonging, which is associated with the city-streets:

'I want to go home,' he says as his hand grips the bark of the tree that's unlike anything he has ever touched before. It's uneven and furred and gnarled and feels so alive in his hands that he wants the dead touch of brick, of concrete, of the streets where he belongs... (7)

In the novel, Connor's disappearance becomes the starting point for four different stories to unfold: that of Henry Stanfield, the truth commissioner of the novel's title, who finds himself obliged to investigate his case; Francis Gilroy, the ex-IRA senior involved in his 'disappearance' who is now occupying the role of Minister for Children and Culture in the new power-sharing government; the retired RUC detective James Fenton who used Connor as a 'tout'; and another former IRA volunteer, Michael Madden alias Danny, who has immigrated to the US to start a new life there. Yet, if Connor's disappearance marks out the constitutional absence that links the stories of these four middle-aged men, it also overshadows the life of his family, specifically his mother and his sister, whose perspective is absent. This absence could be seen to gesture towards the marginalisation of individual victims' experiences in the political landscape of the peace process. Through the institution of the TRC, Park's novel imagines an alternative to Northern Ireland's current tendency to politicise victimhood as part of the ethnic zero-sum power play. In the novel, private traumas are brought into the public sphere in a manner that cuts through the communal politics that currently determine the

²⁸ David Park, *The Truth Commissioner* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 1. All subsequent references to this novel will appear in parenthesis in the text.

²⁹ In modernist writing, the city consistently appears as an image of alienation, whilst the country seems to consist of what Raymond Williams has memorably termed 'knowledgeable communities'. For instance, in his seminal study, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: OUP, 1975), Williams suggests 'a contrast between the fiction of the city and the fiction of the country. In the city kind, experience and community would be essentially opaque; in the country kind, essentially transparent' (165).

victims' debate. In a quasi-utopian manner, then, the TRC in Park's novel promises to give voice to personal experiences, as the individual case of Connor Walshe's disappearance is brought into the public domain; yet, this voice is nonetheless contained as the focus of Park's novel lies, as with actual peace politics, not on the experiences of the female victims/survivors but on the male perpetrators and men in power.

In contrast to the Walshe women's clear desire to know 'the truth' about what really happened, those involved in his death would much rather erase the past. Initially, Park's novel reads as structurally composed of four separate stories about the everyday concerns, regrets, and fears of those four aging men, as each strand abruptly ends at the close of the chapter with the next opening with the narrative of a different (and seemingly unconnected) character. All four protagonists are concerned with their paternal roles and are desperately seeking to live in the future.³⁰ Former IRA leader, Gilroy, is busy with his challenging new ministerial duties. He considers the establishment of the TRC 'a bloody stupid idea', which his party had to sign up for '[b]ecause we sang so loud about having the truth on everything they ever did that we stumbled blindly into the net and then it was too late to get ourselves out when they turned round and asked for our truth' (97). For Gilroy, 'it's time to let the dead stay dead, move on instead of digging them back up every day' (97). His declining health is for him sufficient memory of the past and reminder of the sacrifices he made for the 'struggle'. One of his main worries is the potential loss of his youngest daughter through her impending marriage to Justin, 'who works in London in advertising' (90). Similarly, the childless ex-policeman, Fenton, mourns 'the absence of his children in his marriage' (127). His journeys to an isolated orphanage in the woods of Romania are partly driven by this longing. Made redundant once the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) changed to the new Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) — one of the transformations demanded by the peace agreement — Fenton feels bitter about the unacknowledged sacrifices he had made. However, he had hoped he could leave the past behind:

At times he feels it as a bitterness to have the service he has given, everything that has been scarified, swept off with a quick thank you and a cheque but he could live with it if he was able, as he believed, he would be, to put it all behind him. But it's been a failure because despite everything, despite his active days, the involvement with his church and the Romanian orphanage, it feels as if nothing has been shed, that nothing has left him. (127)

In turn, Michael Madden now resides under a false name as an illegal immigrant in Florida and, together with his Hispanic girlfriend, eagerly awaits the arrival of their first child. In reinventing himself as the Irish 'Danny', he wants to 'To start afresh, step into the future clean and entitled to the happiness that it promises' (228). Seeking to erase his former existence as an IRA volunteer, his biggest fear is 'letting loose the spores of the past, of casting them to the wind with no ways to predict or control where they would land' (228).

The three characters who are directly implicated in Connor's disappearance and subsequent murder seek solace and redemption in the countryside. Having become an

³⁰ For a more detailed discussion of masculinity and paternity in Park's novel, see Stefanie Lehner, 'Post-Conflict Masculinities: Filiative Reconciliation in *Five Minutes of Heaven* and David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*', *Irish Masculinities: Critical Reflections on Literature and Culture*, eds. Caroline Magennis and Raymond Mullen (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 65-76.

enthusiastic hill-walker since his retirement, Fenton reveres ‘the mountains for their cleanness [...] they feel purer than anything he’s ever known’ (124) — thus posing a stark contrast to the corrupt, dirty city environment in which he had worked. In turn, a weekend trip with his wife to a remote hotel in Donegal has a restorative effect on Gilroy and affords him a much-needed ‘sense of rest’ (264). Danny has escaped the urban confines of Belfast altogether and enjoys the redemptive powers of the lake at whose shore he lives, which ‘lulls his senses, reminds him of where he is’ (180) — namely far away from Belfast and his past. Stanfield, by contrast, is confined to the city, which he associates with notably negative tropes.³¹ Stanfield considers Belfast ‘much the same way as he might think of a piece of dirt that he hoped he had shaken off his shoe’ (20). Despite its postmodern re-invention in which the city just ‘feels like everywhere and nowhere’, ‘he senses something primitive that still lurks just below the surface’ (39). This description has eerie resonances with the epigraph to Duncan’s *Trees from Germany* about a ‘prehistoric community’ living beneath the present city in a primordial forest. Stanfield actually inhabits one of the new gentrified Belfast apartments of Duncan’s images: just as in ‘Bells Towers, Ormeau Road’, Park describes how Stanfield ‘keys his security number into the communal doorway and then takes the lift to his top floor’ (36). The actual building of the TRC in Park’s novel is similarly part of the redeveloped Belfast, the Titanic Quarter, ‘where in a former age under the vaulted ceiling the plans of great White Star ocean liners were drawn’ (21). Resonant of the alien looking plants in Duncan’s photographs, natural growth seems here similarly out of place: ‘A few of the [wild] flowers he looked at bore no resemblance to any that he had ever seen, as if they were phantom mutations of raw metal, sparked into life by some long-dead welder’s fiery fantail, their filaments as if iron: their stamens the shred of steel’ (22).

For Stanfield, the city brings with it ‘[t]he curse of memory. Scabs on the soul’ (23). As with most of the other main characters, Stanfield ‘thinks only of the future, of what can still be savoured. Of what experiences still await’ (23). While he derides ‘the city’s gauche attempts to reinvent itself as a cosmopolis’ (23), he himself had planned already ‘to reinvent his own role, airbrush the inconvenient parts that go against the flow, [for] it’s what artists do and above all he is an artist’ (16). Ironically, Park constructs his truth commissioner as a postmodern revisionist who plans to rewrite history, truth and reality. But just as the job forced him to return to his despised former home-town, the TRC confronts him with the ghostly forces of the past when the case of Walshe is brought before the Commission: ‘He doesn’t believe in ghosts but there is something spectral about the thoughts that haunt his consciousness’ (44).

At the hearings, initially, the individual truths about what happened remain subsumed under the collectivised narratives that all involved in Connor’s disappearance have been instructed to maintain. Yet, when the advocate of the victim’s mother produces a recording of Connor’s last words, the spectral presence of his voice forces them to remember:

[Fenton] hears the voice of Connor Walshe. And then he’s transported once again, despite the resistance of his will, to all the places he heard that voice, the voice that is instantly

³¹ There is a long tradition of Belfast being depicted in an unfavourable light, see, for instance, Edna Longley, ‘“A Barbarous Nook”: the Writer and Belfast’, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), 87-105; Eamonn Hughes, ‘“Town of Shadows”: Representations of Belfast in recent Fiction’, *Religion and Literature*, 28.2-3 (1996): 141-160.

recognisable, and there's the same pleading, the familiar edge of desperation that he heard in it the first time, but this time there's no pretence of bravery, no attempt at bravado or aggression. The voice fills the chamber with its whimpering, broken stammer of words and it flows down through the rows of seats and laps round Michael Madden like the water laps and slurps round the jetty at the lake. (327)

As Tom Herron notes, the dead boy here 'takes on the ethical force that spectres possess [...] Connor Walshe returns as a revenant to unsettle the calm surface of the world of the living just as the angel in St John's Gospel returns to trouble the waters of Bethesda'.³² Herron refers here to the novel's Biblical epigraph about the healing powers of troubled waters, which become in the novel explicitly associated with truth-speaking.³³ However, what is commonly neglected in readings of Park's novel is that the passage which is chosen as its epigraph is only a prologue to the story that follows, which is of how Jesus heals a man who has been waiting at the waters for the angel, who then testifies against Jesus, precipitating the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. In other words, Jesus' intervention unleashes severe political consequences. It is thus notable that the ending of the novel entails comparable ramifications: after the hearing of Connor's case, the Commission's archives are set on fire. Stanfield notes: 'There'll be an inquiry of course and for the rest of their bitter, corrosive history each side will blame the other' (369). Arguably, this will mark the end of the operations of the TRC. Just as the fire engulfs the Truth Commission, so too individual truths become subsumed under self-sustaining communal narratives. Stanfield, who alone remained notably critical of the cathartic effects of truth-telling, seems the only one who, as he remarks, 'understands that sometimes the angel troubling the water might only darken the swirling pool of the past' (368-9). Park's novel ends on a note of what might be called cynical realism. Mirroring its epigraph, the novel itself remains open-ended — a prologue to unarticulated subsequent events. Connor's body is being excavated but, through the character of Stanfield, Park is noncommittal about the outcomes.

Taken together, all three artists explore and interrogate the binaries on which the peace process is built: they reveal the absences behind the peace process's presences by pointing to who is left out in its move towards collectivisation; they provide counter-histories to the overriding tilt towards the Future; and they write back into the political environment what is obscured in the peace process's 'idealised landscape'. In looking beyond the façade of that idealized landscape, the three artists uncover the preciousness and precariousness of the realities that lie beneath. However, in so doing, they issue a warning that those realities may ultimately be rendered silent, buried and engulfed by the destructive fire of collective ethics and the picture postcard perfection of the promised utopia.

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³² Tom Herron, 'Learning How to Live: David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*', *No Country for Old Men: Fresh Perspectives on Irish Literature*, eds. Alison O'Malley-Younger and Paddy Lyons (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 25.

³³ See, for instance, Park, *The Truth Commissioner*, 246.

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